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## **UN concerned about slow pace of rebuilding Gaza**

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JERUSALEM, March 25, 2009 (AFP) - The United Nations on Wednesday expressed concern over what it said was lack of progress in rebuilding the besieged Gaza Strip following Israel's devastating 22-day military offensive.

"I'm frankly concerned that, two months after the conflict, things are not significantly moving forward on the ground," said UN Middle East envoy Robert Serry after visiting the Palestinian enclave.

"We must allow the people here the opportunity to restore and rebuild their homes, essential services and dignity," he said in a statement.

More than 1,300 Palestinians were killed and thousands of homes were destroyed in the Israeli offensive that ended on January 18.

Serry stressed that international efforts to rebuild Gaza "cannot be sustained without the crossings being opened, not just for food and medicines, but for materials, people, and commercial traffic."

Israel has imposed a crippling embargo on Gaza after the Islamist Hamas movement seized power there in June 2007, and allows only limited quantities of basic supplies into the impoverished coastal strip.

Serry also stressed the need to achieve progress towards a lasting ceasefire in and around Gaza, as well as reconciliation between Hamas and its archfoe Fatah, which is led by secular Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

He also called on the parties to move forward on a proposed prisoner swap in which an Israeli soldier held since June 2006 would be released in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

"This will benefit everybody on all sides who seek peace through negotiations and co-existence. Otherwise I fear we will drift again towards more violence and suffering, which is in nobody's interest," Serry said.